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ABSTRACT

Because positive teacher-parent relationships have an effect upon student achievement and upon public opinion of the schools, numerous practical suggestions for improving home-school communication are presented. The following four areas are discussed: (1) educating teachers about their roles as public relations agents; (2) improving home-school communications; (3) recognizing good teachers and positive communicators; and (4) encouraging teachers to recognize the uniqueness of a particular child and his/her achievements. (JH)

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[How to Develop Positive Teacher-Parent Relationships.]
[Speaker: Steller; Clinic No.: F-102.]

by

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Arthur W. Steller

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

1983 NSBA Convention/San Francisco April 23-26
Speaker Steller Clinic No F-102

There's a joke making the rounds these days about three people facing a firing squad - a Frenchman, a Japanese and an American. Offered a last wish, the Frenchman asks for a bottle of the finest French champagne. The Japanese gentleman asks to give a lecture on the benefits of Japanese management. The American jumps up and asks to be shot first, screaming that she just can't stand one more lecture on Japanese management.

Now you might wonder what Japanese management has to do with this topic at least as listed in your program. Actually nothing. This lecture has nothing whatsoever to do with techniques of the Japanese, or the French for that matter. The issue of our session today is strictly an American one - "How To Develop Positive Teacher-Parent Relationships." I don't know if the Japanese or French have any problems or answers to this question, but it is a dilemma in this country.

Two reasons why so important, (a) it has an effect upon student achievement and, (b) it has a bearing upon public opinion. The pressure of public opinion has been compared with the atmosphere, you can't see it but it is there, just the same. In many places one way or the other, public opinion affects funding. For example, in Shaker Heights we have had to go to the public for school levies three years in a row. We have mounted a huge campaign and all have passed by a comfortable margin. The primary reason these issues passed was not the campaign, however. It was the fact that parents were pleased with the education their children received from Shaker Heights teachers.

During my remarks, I will cover four main areas. I will begin by offering a brief introduction to this relationship to form a backdrop for other comments. First, that teachers for the most part need to be more aware of their role as PR agents. Secondly, teachers should be given interesting suggestions for improving home-school communications as well as being encouraged to create their own ideas.

Number three is that school districts ought to recognize good teachers and positive communicators. The fourth point is that the focus of this relationship lies in the uniqueness of a particular child and his or her achievements. The child is the wholesaler and, usually, the interpreter for both the parent and the teacher.

From this presentation I would hope that you will obtain one or two good ideas to help you improve parent-teacher relationships. If you get any more workable ideas than that from this brief talk, you should feel obligated to send me one in return, or better yet, you should share a successful practice with this audience during the question and answer period.

We are all familiar with the accounts of declining test scores, poorly trained teachers, the rise in unionism, the inconveniences of teacher strikes, inflation, accountability demands, fewer resources, and the list seemingly goes on and on. The media have perhaps painted a picture more bleak than reality, but, nevertheless, these issues have given rise to a crisis in confidence and escalating complaints from the public and parents. In turn, teachers and other educators have developed negative and distrustful attitudes towards parents. Teachers, and I might add administrators, flock to workshops and seminars on "how to cope with stress and burnout." The phenomenon of defensive attitudes by teachers is a serious matter.

"What's wrong with the parents?" teachers ask. "We spent hours grading papers and preparing at home and we end up with more abuse than praise. School levies are voted down by the public and, consequently, our working conditions are deteriorating. What's wrong?"

Many experts in education and public relations believe that the major problem is the public's lack of knowledge of successes in education and of the truly good things happening every day in classrooms. Many people unfortunately conceive of the classroom in the same fashion as the editorial cartoonist

in the local paper which serves Shaker Heights and a dozen other communities. Late last September a cartoon appeared which depicted a teacher holding his class at bay with a whip and chair, while a parent is running from the room tied to a post and with her hair scalped. The teacher amid graffiti and paper airplanes is shouting "Glad you could join us today, Mrs. Freebin. We always like parents to see for themselves that education today is more than books and calculators." Cute, but inaccurate. We've all heard of the cross-eyed teacher who couldn't keep her pupils under control, but that's the exception rather than the rule. I fired off a letter-to-the-editor which was printed, although the initial damage had been done. Parents or other citizens with a feeling of uneasiness about their nightmare visions of riotous classrooms had already been reinforced.

One point to this illustration is that educators cannot hope to neutralize the negative effects of the media just through the media itself. We are simply outgunned and are not competing on equal ground. A director of school community relations cannot dispel all the false representations which can be perpetuated by a staff of investigative reporters backed up by an editor interested in selling newspapers and a publisher who buys paper by the ton and ink by the barrel.

Teachers play the largest and most critical role in producing public understanding of schooling. They are, of course, the mainstay laborers in the educational enterprise. Teachers translate the goals of the board and decisions of the superintendent through their daily actions. The close contact with students builds rapport and memories that have a residual effect throughout one's life. Teachers communicate with parents and guardians more frequently and in more depth than any other employee group in the system. Normal activities such as homework, school behavior and reporting student progress afford regular opportunities to foster goodwill or to convey something less appealing. What happens at school is

a frequent topic of conversation at the dinner table and elsewhere. A teacher has the power to generate an hour long dialogue between a parent and child over a "well done" written at the top of an essay paper or by the simple act of wearing a new dress to school. Parents judge schools primarily in terms of their children's teachers.

Speaking strictly from the standpoint of communications theory, teachers are far and away the best communication resources available in a school district. Four established communication principles confirm this statement. Communication is enhanced, (a) by the sheer quantity and repetition of the message - teachers give literally thousands of impressions every year, (b) by two-way face-to-face conversations - teachers talk more with parents than the most outgoing administrator or school board member ever could, (c) by the degree of proximity of the parties about the matter under discussion - teachers are treated as part of the family or neighborhood by parents, and (d) by the personal stake the parties have in the issue - teachers communicate with parents on an intimate level. For these reasons, the classroom teacher's public relations has greater influence than the formal PR activities staged by the professional directing school community relations at the central office.

This is not to say that we don't need directors of school community relations. We do desperately. How many of you in the audience have a position like that in your school district? Would you raise your hands, please? Thank you. It would be great if every district had a public relations expert on the payroll. Such an individual can do a lot to enhance the image of education but regardless of how skilled such a person is, the key to community relations is still teachers. That's a resource we all have.

Which brings me to the first step you should take if your aim is to improve teacher-parent relationships.

I. Educate Teachers About Their Roles as PR Agents

In districts with a public information official, the assumption among the staff may be that that particular individual has the entire responsibility for public relations. After all, doesn't PR mean taking pictures, writing news releases, escorting visitors around schools, speaking before large groups and other publicity functions? In the eyes of many teachers this must be somebody else's responsibility. Administrators and school board members may feel that PR is everybody's responsibility, but neglect to clearly say who is to do what. Let me interject a story that makes the point.

Who's Job Is It?

> This is a story about four people named everybody, somebody, anybody, and nobody. There was in important job to be done and everybody was asked to do it. Everybody was sure somebody would do it. Anybody could have done it. But nobody did it. Somebody got angry about that because it was everybody's job. Everybody thought anybody could do it but nobody realized that everybody wouldn't do it. It ended up that everybody blamed somebody when nobody did what anybody could have done.

Be sure that this is not what is happening with public relations in your district.

Mrs. Elizabeth Koontz, a former president of the National Education Association, is convinced that school public relations involves classroom teachers. She believes that teachers ought to be expected to assist and that they should be asking what they can do to help the most. Besides being good for the profession, she says that it is in a teacher's own best interest.

Gordon McCloskey, an established expert in the field of school community relations, has written that teachers are often reluctant to accept much responsibility for public relations because they do not recognize the need. He proposes disseminating information to staff that explains in simple terms that adequate support for educational programs and the economic well being of teachers hinge upon the success of their communication efforts. If you think that is too elementary and ridiculously simple to be useful, let me tell you that we have had teachers in Shaker Heights who have actually opposed school levies. Incredible as it sounds, they did not understand that the funds raised by levies paid their salaries! In essence, McCloskey is saying that the key to communicating with parents is teachers, however, one must first communicate with teachers.

Making Teachers More Aware of Their Role as PR Agents

- All teachers hired new should be given a list of specific expectations including those involving public relations.
- Teachers currently employed should contribute to this list.
- Have teachers and others develop at least one personal goal and objective - Al Holliday, a noted PR expert, calls these PAS - personal achievement system - which is very similar to MBO.
- Establish "positive two-way communication with parents" as a school goal. Brainstorm activities with staff.
- Be sure to discuss the informal aspects of teachers communicating with parents outside of school. Rumor control is important and often hinges upon teachers living in the community.
- Encourage the concept that problems can always be solved, even when arguments cannot be won.
- Consider teachers as professionals capable of positive public relations.
- Set an example by sending birthday cards and other cards and flowers to teachers.
- Promote the slogan that reasonable people can disagree without being disagreeable.

- Hold special activities for milestone events, 20 year anniversary for a particular program, or people.
- Informally ask teachers once in awhile to tell you the good things that happened in their classrooms.
- Invite news media representatives to speak at faculty meetings.

The overall message the staff should communicate should be one of pride in where they work and those with whom they work.

II. Suggestions for Improving Home-School Communications

As a principal a parent called about outrageous stories his first grader told him. Set up appointment with teacher. Parent came by afterwards and thanked me. Curious what change. The father said well the teacher told me that she wouldn't believe all the stories about home if I wouldn't believe all the stories about school.

II. Suggestions for improving Home-School Communications

1. Respond thoughtfully and as promptly as possible to telephone calls or other correspondence.

2. Share information about schools through newsletters, community meetings and other forums.

3. Handwritten notes work wonders, the written word is one of the key links between educators and parents.

4. Communicate with straightforward messages in language parents understand. Efforts of educators to impress laymen with "educationese" often turns parents off.

5. Parent-teacher conferences that are well planned can be informative for both teacher and parent.

6. Invite groups of parents to early morning breakfasts at your school. Find out their concerns and ask for suggestions about improving the school.

7. Extend personal courtesies (e.g., a special invitation to a school function, inquiries about a sick child).

8. Develop a volunteer program that encourages parents to take an active role in the school.

9. Invite parents and community members to visit your classroom to give presentations, etc.

10. Make home visits or attend community activities in which students are involved.

11. Develop a special parent education plan (e.g., special parent workshops on testing, study skills are most beneficial to parents).

12. Solicit parental participation for special activites in the classroom.

13. School advisory groups made up of parents serve as a good indicator of community concerns.

14. Use community resources through sponsoring the following activities: mini-PTA, toy market, summer learning packets, inviting speakers to classrooms, exhibits at shopping centers, donating lost and found items to charity, places to visit calendars, etc.

15. Other ideas: parent resource files, letters to newborns, calls to sick children, feature family of the week, grade level dinners, state of the class messages, grandparents' days, a "talk back" report card, class cookbooks, used book exchange, student/parent fashion shows, and a foreign language bank made up of students/parents for out-of-town visitors.

16. Start off the school year by sending a welcome letter to each child in August. Finish off the year with a note to each child after school is out.

17. Occasionally provide a child care center for meetings when parents will be attending who have younger children.

18. Showcase extracurricular activities and clubs outside of the school building.

19. "Think visual" - add simulated bullfights to the Spanish class lunchtime festival.

20. Student government days or visits to governmental officials are opportune occasions for media coverage.

21. Hold teacher-student switch days.

22. Arrange for high school students and junior high feeder students to exchange places for a day.

III. Recognizing Good Teachers and Positive Communicators

1. Develop a monthly newsletter to employees highlighting PR efforts of teachers.

2. Make it a point to pass on compliments to all faculty and staff, frequently. Give recognition when it is due.

3. Acknowledge appreciation to staff members with special notes of thanks.

4. Feature outstanding accomplishments of teachers in school newsletter.

5. Ask teacher's assistance in conducting a teacher in-service session on public relation techniques.

6. Encourage the PTA to sponsor a teacher appreciation breakfast or lunch.

7. Mention to PTA leaders that teachers in general and specific teachers should be recognized for their efforts.

8. Encourage local groups such as the Jaycees or Chamber of Commerce to sponsor outstanding teacher programs.

9. Request community organizations to draw upon school employees as speakers for meetings of their group.

10. Let parents know that teachers appreciate notes or calls of praise. Good teaching is often taken for granted by parents.

11. Use "special cards" (good for rlease of one assigned duty) to reward teachers.

12. Take a personal interest in the staff.

13. Send "Thank You" grams to teachers.

14. Make sure teachers' suggestions are followed up on and publicly considered.

15. Never discuss parental complaints about specific teachers in public.

16. Honor "Staff Members of the Week."

17. Appreciate the ordinary things.

18. Establish Excellence Reports at board meetings to recognize outstanding teachers.

19. Suggest to parents and others that they show their appreciation to teachers for extra special events through "letters-to-the editor."

20. Send "newsreleases" about individual teachers totheir church or club bulletins.

IV. Teachers Should Recognize the Uniqueness of a Particular Child and His/Her Achievements

Scott Cutlip and Allen Center, two noted PR experts have stated: There is no surer route to a person's heart - or resentment - than through his or her child.

1. Utilize happiness notes or success cards encouraging comments and recognition (this helps students feel successful, success is the fuel of motivation for even greater success).

2. Arrange for media coverage of student events.

3. Feature students in school newsletter, highlighting achievements.

4. Write a note to parents, complimenting them on their child's accomplishments.

5. Develop a bulletin board display which highlights a student or students. Display pictures and short synopsis of the achievement.

6. Allow pupils to share their experiences with other students during assemblies or via closed circuit T.V. Then share this with parents.

7. "Catch children doing good" and let their parents know as well.

8. Initiate a "Star of the Day" program.

9. Start a positive calls-to-parents program in which teachers make few short telephone calls a week.

10. Have teachers periodically provide administrators with the names of students who have done something outstanding, so that the administrator might congratulate the youngsters and contact their parents.

11. Save samples of good work of a student to give to his or her parents as a holiday gift.

12. Make sure that all students are recognized for something positive during the school year.

13. Invite recent graduates back to speak to classes or parent meetings.

14. Communicate the success of secondary students to "feeder" schools.

Parents give schools two of their most important assets - their children and their money. It is no wonder that parents want us to handle these treasures with such care.

One part of the relationship between teachers and parents is report cards. Some of you may have heard the story of the boy who brings home a poor report card. He has 3 F's and a C. His father asks "Son, what's wrong?" The boy replies, "Looks like I'm spending too much time on one subject."

As educational leaders we want to be sure that teachers address all of their responsibilities including building a positive relationship with parents.